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ABSTRACT

Five research reports on the use of instructional modules, originally published in the Atlanta "Journal and Constitution" as "Improving Reading Skills" and widely used in Georgia as the "Athens Model," are summarized in this paper. For research purposes, the modules were concentrated in time as a high saturation reading program, although in practice teachers opt for instruction using the 50 modules over a longer period of time. The subjects were elementary and secondary students from schools located throughout the state of Georgia. The American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) Newspaper Test, published by the Educational Testing Service, was the primary test used in pretests, posttests, and delayed posttests (retention tests) ten weeks after the conclusion of newspaper-based instruction. The results of the research on the Improving Reading Skills program indicated that the method is effective with all but students with the lowest level of reading achievement. The ten recommendations and implications of the research are also presented. (RB)

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# The Athens Model: Results of a High Saturation Program in Newspaper Reading Skill

Presented at International Reading Association, May, 1975

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Summarized are the results and implications of five research reports of use of instructional modules and daily newspapers in a high saturation model to improve newspaper reading skills. Each of fifty modules has highly specific measurable behavioral objectives and details the procedures to be followed by the teacher. No prior training in the teaching of reading or in the use of the modules is required of teachers.

In each of the five field tests the modules were used for fifty consecutive class days in a standard fifty minute period. The modules are untimed, however; teachers terminate use of a module when they determine that objectives have been achieved as well as is reasonable to expect of students of a given ability level. Except that the first ten modules include the most basic newspaper reading skills, modules are unsequenced. The high saturation model utilized was for field test purposes; in most cases of actual teaching practice, teachers opt for less intensive use. Published by the Atlanta Journal and Constitution as Improving Reading Skills, the modules have been used by approximately four thousand teachers in Georgia and the Southeast.

With one exception, all components of a standard daily newspaper are used in one or more modules. Unfortunately, the astrological column which is the one exclusion has been determined to be the most popular component by the students involved in the field tests.

As a set, the modules have eighteen general objectives:

1. Identifying the main points in an article.
2. Locating desired information quickly.
3. Identifying points not made in an article.
4. Identifying sources of information.
5. Judging the reliability of information sources.
6. Evaluating the relative importance of each of several points.

7. Distinguishing between fact and opinion.
8. Assessing creditability of news and editorial content.
9. Interpreting causes of events.
10. Predicting consequences of action.
11. Reading and interpreting maps, charts, graphs, and tables.
12. Assessing advertising content.
13. Recognizing variations in appropriate language use in various sections of newspapers.
14. Interpreting photographs and cartoons.
15. Critical analysis of content of various types of articles.
16. Evaluating constitutional guarantees of a free press.
17. Relating factual information about newspapers as businesses and as social institutions.
18. Using accurately technical terminology of newspapers that contributes to more effective newspaper reading.

These objectives are measured by the ANPA Foundation Newspaper Test published by Educational Testing Service. The test, available in two parallel versions at both junior and senior high level, requires student use of a newspaper that is provided to answer most of the questions. Students thus simulate very closely their use of a standard daily newspaper. As judged by many students, the most difficult items appear first in the test. There is reason to believe that in some administrations, achievement was underestimated when students did not reach items to which they knew the answers. (The test is untimed, but school schedules sometimes in effect create a time limit.)

The first two field tests, one each in elementary and in junior high school, were conducted in Hancock County, Georgia. Hancock County in rural central Georgia, has a population over 70% black; the public school population

is almost entirely black. Annual family income is under $3000 for 70% of the population and under $1000 for 20%. Until 1974, when cumulative intensive efforts to improve educational achievement began to show their effect, students in Hancock County ranked at or near the bottom of all Georgia school systems on all tests in the annual state-wide testing program. For example, the mean reading score for juniors in one year was at the first percentile nationally. The site was selected because of the need for improvement locally and the subsequently verified assumption that if significant gains occurred, the modules probably could produce desired results in any other school system.

The ANPA Newspaper Test was used for a pretest, posttest, and a delayed posttest ten weeks after conclusion of newspaper based instruction. To determine what effects, if any, the project had on general reading skills, the STEP Reading Test was used as pretest and posttest. Use of this test premitted direct comparison with student achievement in previous years.

In grades 4-6 in the elementary school, gains on the ANPA Newspaper Test were significant at the .005 level in seventeen classes, significant at the .005 level in one, and insignificant in one. The class that failed to gain significantly included the poorest readers in the homogeneously grouped fourth grade. On the delayed posttest, despite no further instruction in newspaper use, a further gain at .0005 level occurred among fourth grade students. Gains in grades five and six approached the level required for significance. Following instruction, fourth graders were superior in newspaper reading skills to uninstructed seventh graders in this school system.

Results on the STEP test showed gains significant at the .0005 level in each of the three grades. Class sections of the poorest readers at each grade level did not gain significantly, however. Gains in general reading skills at each grade level ranged from double to triple those normally attained in past in these grades.

Among the five sections in the junior high school, three had gains significant at .0005 level, one was at .005, and one, the poorest readers, did not gain on the newspaper test. On the STEP test, four sections had gains significant at .005, and again the section comprised of the poorest readers did not gain significantly.

The remaining three field tests were conducted in Wilkes County, Georgia with modules revised as indicated by the Hancock County experience. Wilkes County schools draw their students from a small city and rural areas. In the state testing program its students approximate state norms. In reading, students are approximately one year below national norms. The racial mix is somewhat akin to that of public schools statewide. While no single school system in Georgia is "typical", Wilkes does approach being representative of the state as a whole.

Modules and daily newspapers again were used for fifty day periods with all students in grades 4-6 in one project, and with approximately half in grades 7-9 in another. That half was identified as a group with reading problems.

Of sixteen junior high classes, gains on the newspaper reading test in four were significant at .0005 level, six at .005 level, three at .05 level, and three did not gain significantly. Students in each of these last three classes read two or more years below grade level, and most were identified as retarded. Ninth graders, despite having been identified as problem readers, attained national norms in newspaper reading skills for instructed high school students that have been reported by Educational Testing Service. Better readers initially maintained their advantage, but did not have significantly greater gains than others, except those identified as retarded.

In the elementary project, which included all students in grades 4-6 in

the school system, the effects of sex, race, and prior reading ability on newspaper reading skill improvement were examined. At each grade level, there was no significant difference in gain scores by sex. In grades 4 and 5 gain scores did not differ significantly by race. In grade 6, white students were significantly superior in gain scores. It seemed probable that this difference was specific to the situation, however, and generalizations should not be drawn.

Based on school records, students were classified in four reading levels: (1) at or above grade level, (2) up to one year below (3) one to two years below, and (4) over two years below. Levels one and two were significantly better than three or four in gain. Level three was significantly superior to level four. Observation of individual scores showed stability at levels one and two, with few students failing to gain substantially. At levels three and four, individuals tended either to do quite well or show no progress. Fifteen of twenty classes had gains significant at the .0005 level. Gain of three others was significant at .005, while two, the poorest readers in grades 4 and 6 did not gain significantly. An examination of individual scores for the equivalent section of grade 5 showed that its significant gain could be attributed to the very high gains of a relatively small proportion of the class.

The fifth study, conducted in Wilkes County in a subsequent year, included seventy-four junior high school students who read two years or more below grade level. While some had the experience of the earlier project, they were too few to permit generalization about the effect of that experience. In this study, the instructors were trained teachers of reading. Instructional methods and materials were not limited to newspapers and modules during the academic year in which the study was made.

On the ANPA Newspaper Test, gains were significant for each of five classes at .0024, .0001, .0034, .0001, and .0009 levels of confidence respectively.

No significant difference by sex occurred; however, 70% of the subjects selected as the most severe reading problems in the school were male. No difference by race was obtained, but 89% of the subjects were black. The school population is approximately 40% black. The posttest mean for the total group was almost identical to that reported by Educational Testing Services as a norm. In other academic respects, these students were highly deficient.

Generalizing from the five studies, several recommendations and implications are enabled.

1. Daily newspapers, used in conjunction with Improving Reading Skills, can be expected to produce substantial improvement in newspaper and general reading skills.

2. Improvement can be expected regardless of sex or race.

3. Better readers initially will gain most -- the rich get richer.

4. Newspaper use before sixth grade with below average readers has questionable cost effectiveness.

5. Newspaper use in grades 4 and 5 for average or better readers is highly desirable. Skill development continues after instruction ends.

6. No teacher training in the teaching of reading is necessary for effective use of Improving Reading Skills modules.

7. As compared with other teaching materials, newspapers produce high student interest, probably because they are seen as a part of the real and adult world.

8. The high saturation model is effective. It seems probable that a program extending through grades 4-12 (or 6-12 for very poor readers) would be more effective, however.

9. Even newspapers do not reach junior high school students who have decided to drop out of school at the earliest legal date.

10. Effects of modifying the sequence of questions on the ANPA Newspaper Test should be investigated.

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